

LEGACY

A DRAGON AGE II ANNIVERSARY ZINE



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Thank you for downloading,





We are so proud of everyone who worked hard to bring you this zine. 10 years is a big milestone and its amazing that so many people still love DA2 so much. DA2 is no doubt a special game for everyone who played it and it means so much that we can celebrate its 10th anniversary like this. We hope you enjoy reading!

Sincerely,
















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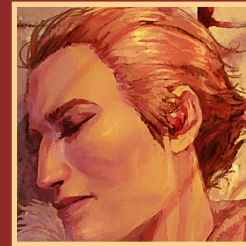
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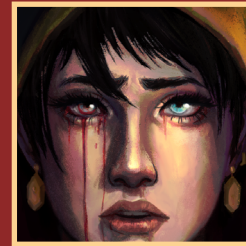
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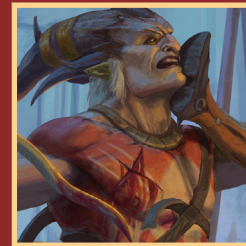
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KIRKWALL GUARD



Varric's Story

By: Mitch Hamilton

You look starstruck, kid. Don't be. I'm just a dwarf, same as any other. Varric Tethras, at your service. You want something signed or did you just want to see my winning smile up close?

I get it. You've read the Tale of the Champion and you want to know if there was anything left out. You're not the first to ask. Believe me, there are plenty of stories that ended up being pulled. Hawke was in Kirkwall for seven years. You think I could fit all that in one book? I mean Blondie alone could've been another ten chapters...

Tell you what, why don't you sit down and let me buy you a drink. Yeah, yeah, I know that's not what you were angling for but as it turns out you've caught me in a nostalgic mood today. Maybe it'll do me some good to talk about this stuff out loud rather than sticking in on paper.

So, you want to know about Hawke. You definitely came to the right dwarf. I've known Hawke for a long time now. And believe me, she's not one to hog the spotlight, no matter how much it seems insistent on shining on her. Wherever she is now, I'm sure she's mad about the book.

The thing is, if you've read my book you already know Hawke. You know what she was like. So there's nothing I can tell you about her that'll shine some new light on her personality. But a good story? I've got plenty of those.

Alright, how about this one?

It wasn't long after me and Hawke had made it back topside from our trip to the Underdark, and things weren't going great. Sure, there was coin in our purse and more to come once we got our treasures sold, but that was really all we had going for us. Bethany was off with the Wardens. Hawke and Isabella were back in one of their "off-again" periods. So you can imagine Hawke's feeling pretty down. That's when I get to thinking- I want to do something nice for my friend.

So here's my idea. Hawke's got all this coin now, what she needs is an idea as to how to spend it. Me, I've moved in fancy circles before, plenty of money in the guilds and merchant life, so I figure I can give her a little treat, show her how the upper half live. I get word of a shindig happening up in High Town. Crème-de-la-crème, as our Orlesian cousins like to say. At the time it sounded like just the thing to get Hawke's mind away from caves and darkspawn.

Something else you should know about me- I'm not always the best judge of a situation. But I guess seeing as you've read the Tale, you know that already.

It took me some persuading to get Hawke on board at first. She was all down for spending the money, but on something important like getting her mom out of Low Town. Which was fair. That hole Gamlen had them living in wasn't fit for a dog, let alone a family. It was Merrill who got her on board in the end. None of us were ever any good at saying no to Merrill.

Glad-rags are easy enough to come by in the market, and we had coin enough to look pristine. I swear, I'd never seen Hawke in anything other than chainmail, but it turned out she sure knew how to wear a suit. A dress was never going to happen, she'd made that clear. Merrill on the other hand... Damn. Let's just say I think I've seen Orlesian wedding cakes with fewer ruffles and layers.

With Isabella off, and Fenris not exactly being a party animal, it was actually Blondie who ended up finishing up our little band. Don't look at me like that, this was years before he... Well, you didn't want to talk about that.

So there we are, me, Hawke, Merrill and Anders, off to a High Town ball. You'd think it would be harder to get an invite, but coin really does open every door in this town. The noble throwing the shindig was a fella by the name of Marius Fevello. His granddaddy had made it big selling Orlesian imports to up-and-comers once Kirkwall started making real money, and Fevello had kept up the tradition, investing in whatever business that was gonna keep those family finances looking fat and healthy. I'd seen his sort a dozen times at every Dwarven merchant gathering.

Still, I remember thinking there was something off about the guy the moment we met up close. He was doing the rounds, greeting his guests. I doubt he'd even met most of 'em before that night. Here we are in all our finery and along comes Fevello. "If it is not the noted explorers of the Deep Roads themselves, here in my very salon." I remember his smile was wide. Too wide. That's a word of advice you can take with you, kid. Always count

the teeth.

Hawke didn't seem too impressed by the whole thing to be honest. Maybe I'd over-estimated the appeal of a taste of luxury. "Good to be here," she replied stiffly.

I nudged her, after Fevello had moved onto schmoozing with other notable folks in attendance. "What was that about? Not having a good time?"

"It's not that, Varric," Blondie chimed in. "You felt it too, didn't you, Hawke?"

Merrill looked relieved. "Not just me then. I was worried I was imagining it all for a minute there."

Clearly I was the last to get the memo as to whatever the Hells they were talking about. And believe me, kid, I'm not a fan of being left out of the loop. "What's going on?"

"That man has been touched by magic," Blondie replied, eyes fixed on Fevello in the crowd, "if not possessed then certainly enthralled by some powerful spirit."

"You guys could tell just by looking at him?"

"Trust me. I've had Justice riding around inside me long enough to recognize the signs."

Hawke nodded. "And you don't spend your entire life guarding a secret mage sister from the Templars without learning how to spot hidden magic."

"Maybe we could help him!" Typical Merrill. I swear, that elf has sunbeams for a heart. "He might not know what he's gotten himself into, especially if he's not been trained properly."

Now, normally I would've said something terribly witty to remind Merrill about the fact that if a guy like Fevello was keeping a secret magic habit going on the side as long as he had so far, he'd probably just kill us where we stood to keep it that way rather than open up to help, but at that moment I was way too occupied scanning the crowd for nearby Templars to worry about that. If there was gonna be trouble I wanted to be sure I knew exactly how much and where the nearest exit was.

Blondie's eyes were still stuck on the back of Fevello's head. "He seems stable, but he's been playing with a powerful force. He could lose control at any moment if he's not careful."

In situations like that there's only one question that really matters, kid: Is it a 'run before the bad stuff happens' kinda moment or a 'try and get everyone out now' kind? Needless to say, not a decision I was hoping to be making when I'd gotten us an invite. But that's my luck in a nutshell.

What was the party like? You're really asking me that? You did hear the part where I said the guy running the show was running around with unstable magic inside him about to erupt and ruin everything, right? You did? Geez. It was a fine show, I suppose, if you like that sort of thing. Had plenty of tiny sandwiches on silver trays. Plenty of cheap wine in expensive glassware. I'd stopped paying attention once it was clear which way the night was going to go.

I get that look. "How could you be sure," that's what you're thinking, right? Let's just say things had a habit of going wrong around Hawke.

Took a while, mind, I'll grant you that. Maybe it's just that fate has a sense of humor, or that whenever Andraste shits in my dinner she likes to wait for the most dramatically appropriate moment. I'm a writer, I can appreciate the sense of timing at least.

It was late when things finally took their inevitable turn. Fevello was to give a speech, the usual thanking guests for coming, some vague promises of more wine and good company in future, that sort of thing. I'd been on edge all night, watching the room with Merrill while Anders and Hawke snuck about looking for some evidence we could rub in the smug bastard's face. Gotta say, overall it was not the worst time I'd had at a Kirkwall party, but the imminent threat of a violent, demon-filled denouement had really put a damper on my mood. I remember thinking to myself as Fevello took center stage, maybe, just maybe, he had this thing under better control than Blondie had given him credit for. Maybe this time things would go smooth.

I swear, my optimistic heart will be the death of me.

No sooner had Fevello taken center stage than he began to convulse, his body shaking like he'd taken a sip of Darkspawn blood. Merrill was looking at me, unsure what came next, but I already had Bianca out and ready. This was it.

At that very moment Hawke and Anders came bursting into the room, eyes wide. Whatever they'd been looking for, they'd clearly found it. "Fevello! Stop this!"

But it was too late.

Don't know if you've ever seen a demon possess someone up close. Kid, it ain't pretty. Whatever had a hold of Fevello was a mean one too, really bent him every which way while it took hold. It had brought friends too; green gassy portals were popping up all around the room, ready to disgorge their passengers. In just a few moments there was Fevello, sporting a brand new look and a fair few more claws than previously, plus his entourage of eight or so tag-alongs from the fade ready to cause all manner of mayhem. The rest of the guests? Already running for the doors. Nothing like a high-towner to know when to quit.

Now I'm a hardy fellow, been in my fair share of bad scenes, but let me tell you kid, even I wasn't feeling great about our odds. But that's sort of the secret, see- even if you're sure in your head that those odds aren't going to go your way, when it counts you've gotta ignore the odds and go with your guts telling you stay alive no matter what. That's what keeps you alive.

And my guts were working overtime. I rattled off a barrage of shots from Bianca as I watched Hawke twirl that greatsword of hers like it was a dancer's baton. She sliced through a rage demon's skin with ease, magma and viscera spraying from the open wound. Ever had that stuff get on you? I don't recommend, the burn'll take weeks to heal. Not that Hawke paid it any mind. She was already moving onto the next, stepping forward and sweeping that sword out to cleave her way through anything in her path. Gods, but it was always a pleasure watching her work.

"Varrie! Look out!!" It was Blondie, yelling across the room. Good thing too; I'd gotten so caught up watching Hawke I hadn't even noticed the green miasma filling the corridor ahead of. Something was about to pop on through and make a meal of yours truly. I skidded to a halt, hefted up Bianca and took aim straight into the middle of that dirty fog. Sure as Hells, something screeching soon popped into view. Didn't screech for long though. One tug of her trigger, and Bianca delivered an arrow straight through its forehead. It dropped like a stone then collapsed into that creepy black dust those monsters always fade back into.

"Get to Fevello," Hawke called from the ground, still spinning in a deadly bladed hurricane. "We need to end this now!"

I'd taken the highest vantage point I could find to watch the party, so I took in the scene. Sure enough, there was Fevello, still standing at the top of the stairs, arms spread wide and floating a good two feet off the floor. Your usual possessed mage bullshit. Something about taking physical form outside the Fade seems to turn every demon into a drama queen.

"Ignorant mortals!" (They all talk like that, kid, it's a whole goddamn thing.) "I will consume you where you stand!"

I could've maybe come up with some tremendously witty rejoinder but in the moment I opted just to let Bianca do the talking. Her volley didn't do much, most of it bursting into splinters soon as it came close to the guy, but it was a distraction at least. Gave Hawke a window to get up those stairs and do what she did best.

Not that Fevello was about to go down easy, mind. Hawke's sword was working overtime to try and find an opening, but a magic barrier is hard to crack, especially one cast by a demon. But there's a dwarven saying, see- it takes more than one pickaxe to dig a mine. If it was just Hawke going at him, well, maybe Fevello would've had a chance, but even discounting my own valuable contributions Hawke had two mages of her own at her back. Merrill and Anders were working overtime, a barrage of bolts flying from the pair of them towards Fevello. That barrier was powerful, but there's not a magic shield in Thedas that can withstand that kind of intensity. And I had to hand it to Blondie, that crazy bastard really knew how to throw magic around.

I watched as the demon-Fevello thing realized it was in trouble. It's barrier was cracking like glass, shards of it falling away as sword and spell continued to batter at it. These monsters never expect fear; it's always something to see when it starts to creep in. "You fools," it cried, raising its claws to deliver a final blast of magic. "You think you have the right to oppose me? I am might and will incarnate! I am unstoppable! I am all-powerful-"

It was cut off by the barrier finally giving way and the sight of Hawke's blade rushing towards it.

Now I don't know if self-preservation is a common instinct in demons. If it is, it ain't one I've come across all that often myself. So maybe it was the little bit of Fevello left in there that saw death coming and took back control just enough to throw that demon right back into the fade. I tell you kid, it's still one of the strangest things I've seen. One second a demon, all teeth, claws and frothing rage, then another flash of green and there's

Fevello, same as he ever was save for being completely out cold.

“Hawke!!” It was Blondie, yelling out. Gritting her teeth, Hawke stopped the falling sword just inches from Fevello’s chest. The fella looked to be completely unconscious now, sweating out a thousand fevers. Whatever friends the demon had brought along had vanished too, apparently sent running along with their master. For a moment, everything was still.

“Did we do it?” Merrill asked, staring about. “Is it over?”

“Not yet,” Hawke replied, eyes still stuck on Fevello. One final sweep of the house to make sure we’d gotten the stragglers and there weren’t any party guests left to spy on us, and it was time to decide what to do about what was left of the poor bastard.

Blondie spoke first. “I say we let him go.”

“What do you mean, let him go? Didn’t you see the part where he just tried to kill us and everyone in here?”

“That wasn’t him! That was the spirit possessing him! If he’s given time, proper training...”

Hawke put her hand on Blondie’s shoulder. “There’s no Fevello left to train, Anders. I’m sorry.”

“So what, we put him down like a dog? What if someone suggested the same course of action with me, or with Bethany for that matter!?”

“That’s not fair, Anders, you know it’s not the same,” Merrill said.

Things were getting heated, and me being the people-pleaser that I am wasn’t about to stand for it. The night had gone about as badly as it possible could without one of us actually dying. “Look, this is on me, alright? I was the one who had the stupid goddamn idea to come here in the first place. So don’t go yelling at Hawke, alright?”

“Stop it, Varric. You didn’t know what would happen either.”

Anders had that look in his eye now, like a wounded puppy. “Please, Hawke. Look, the demon is gone. I’m proof that with a bit of effort you can control this. You saw what I saw in the basement. He’s spent years hiding this and it’s twisted it all up into this horrid thing. Killing him won’t fix any of that.”

Hawke took a deep breath...

Hey, look at the time! Damn, didn’t mean to get so caught up. It’s getting late, you must want to be getting on.

No? What did Hawke do? Heh. You sure you want to know?

It’s not all that funny to be honest. In the end she killed him. He was possessed. There’s no coming back from that. There’s only one person I’ve known in all my life who’s managed to carry a demon around in them for a while before losing themselves completely, and, well, anyone who’s visited that crater where the chantry used to be can tell you how that turned out.

Or maybe that’s just what we all agreed to say. Maybe a boat left the next morning with an extra passenger and enough gold in the captain’s pocket that he wouldn’t ask too many questions. Maybe Hawke’s fortune was diminished just enough to get a man who needed help to somewhere where he’d get it, without a bunch of templars kicking in his door down the line. Enough coin to the right people in Kirkwall and even a party where three secret mages went at it half the night can be forgotten. She’d been looking to figure out how to spend her new fortune after all.

Don’t look at me like that. I only promised you the story. Besides, I’ve always hated writing endings. Come on. I’ll buy you another round to make up for it. Maybe if you stick around I can tell you another one.





Bonds

By: PocketShna

Bethany had lost count of how many times she had reread the scuffed handwriting of her uncle's letter. It was surreal how numb she had felt hearing the news the first time, how empty. First Carver, now Mother. Would she be next? Was this what the Maker had in store for her? The Taint's dark song whispered vile things as she folded the parchment and placed it alongside the wedding portrait Marian had managed to steal from the manor the night they broke in looking for grandfather's will. She had brought it with her when they went on the expedition, to remind herself why she had fought so hard to go in the first place. Now, it was all she had left of home. Stroud and the others were accommodating, though the mustached warrior would have scoffed and said it was only because he needed her head on straight for the next mission, and even offered to hold a wake so she could say her last goodbye. Now she stood and watched as the flames of the funeral pyre licked and curled around the last pieces of her heart and resolved that if all that was left for her in this world was nothing but death and darkness, then it would be better to not feel at all.

It had been several months since Gamlen's letter and, with Mother gone, all contact with her old life seemed to end with it. All she knew was that Marian Hawke was on the lips of every traveling merchant that had passed through the Free Marches. A protector of the people, slayer of dangerous blood mages and slavers alike. The boat lurched forward and a knot formed in the pit of her stomach as the city of chains came into view on the horizon. She had hoped she'd never have to lay eyes on it again after all these years, but it seemed the Maker had other plans.

Stroud had shot her a disapproving frown when she suggested sailing onward to Wycome. She knew the Darkspawn activity that was reported near Sundermount could not be ignored and, as a Warden, it was her job now to do something about it. Whether she liked it or not. The towering statues gave her a looming sense of déjà vu as they approached the inner harbor. At first glance the docks were quiet with barely a soul in sight, but as the ship drew closer the sound of chaos was all around them.

Smoke and flame billowed from broken merchant stalls as throngs of

people ran screaming through the streets of Lowtown. Hastily erected barricades made to keep attackers away were now flaming obstacles trapping those they meant to protect. A woman stumbled at their feet as they reached the main Bazaar; her forehead was bloody and her well-tailored dress was torn and covered in soot.

"Warden! Help us please!" the woman shouted as she clawed helplessly on Stroud's breastplate. "The Qunari are attacking the city, they've already taken Hightown! They intend to slaughter the rest of us!" Suddenly the woman's body went limp, an arrow pierced through her corseted back.

"Vinek kathas Basra!"

The Qunari were upon them faster than they had anticipated. If Bethany had hesitated a moment longer, her barrier would have been too late to save them from the next volley of arrows. Not wanting to add to the blaze already raging around them, she cast Blizzard next. Stroud signaled to her fellow Wardens to use the cover to get to a better position. Their leader knew there were not enough of them to fight off an ambush. If they were going to fight, they'd have to fight smart.

They made it as far as the Hanged Man before the next wave caught up with them. A Qunari descended upon Bethany, spear in hand. "Bas saarebas!" He bellowed painfully as she struck his exposed chest with a lightning bolt. His body spasmed and twitched before he fell to the ground.

"Katara, bas!" another yelled as he charged past his fallen comrade. The brute connected, knocking her to the ground before she could release another bolt. Her head swam from the blow, and she could only watch with morbid fascination as the mountain of a man raised his blade for his killing blow. Was this it? Would she lose her life to a Qunari in some Lowtown back alley and not to the Darkspawn and its Taint? Maybe the Maker did have a sense of humor after all.

"Now you fall!"

Blood sprayed across her face, but it was not her own. The Qunari hovering above looked down at her in surprise as the blade of a greatsword slid free from the gaping hole in his chest. With a smile, the ebony haired warrior that saved her offered a hand to pull her to her feet. The Maker had a sense of humor indeed.

Her savior's smile faltered to concern as their bright blue eyes met her

honey-colored ones.

“Bethany?”

“Somehow, I knew it would be you.” The mage couldn’t help the tinge of venom in her words as she brushed her sister’s outstretched hand aside. Another unit of Qunari approached from the direction of the Alienage. Marian frowned as her friends met them with equal vigor. “Go on. The others need your help more than I do.”

It was like the last several years were nothing but a dream. Marian stood like a beacon, and all that stood before her would yield to her might. Bethany watched as her sister charged back in the fray, her masterwork sword glistening in the firelight like the blade itself was aflame. Before long, the Qunari were beaten back, and both parties were able to assess their own for injuries. Bethany could feel Marian’s eyes upon her as she worked carefully to stitch together a ghastly wound on one of her fellow warden’s shoulders.

“What are you doing here Beth? I thought you left Kirkwall behind?”

She swallowed roughly before answering, not looking up from her task.

“I’m a Warden now, we go where we’re needed.”

“You have our sincere thanks.” Stroud interrupted. “I cannot believe the Qunari would dare such an attack. This will lead to war with the Free Marches for certain.”

“Stroud we need to move,” Bethany interjected coldly. “We’ve wasted enough time here already.”

“You won’t stay and help us?” Marian looked to her pleadingly. “We could use your aid.”

“I fear pressing matters take us elsewhere,” Stroud answered for her. “But we can spread the word to the other free cities. Perhaps they will bring aid.”

Bethany picked up her gear and gave her old friends a solemn nod before turning to join the others.

“Wait!” her sister yelled. “About mother-“

“I know.” She cut off her sibling before she could continue. Pushing back the ache in her heart, she turned back to the face that was a constant reminder of everything her life had become. “When we got the news the wardens helped me hold a wake.” She took a deep breath before she continued. “I’m... glad you were with her. In her final moments.”

“This is not the time.” Stroud warned.

Bethany gave her superior a curt nod. “Goodbye sister...” She turned on her heel, ready to run, but something held her back. “Take care of yourself.”

They reached Sundermount mountain with little interference after that. It seemed the Qunari were primarily focused on the city and those within rather than what laid beyond its walls. Bethany had recognized the familiar red sails of Merrill’s Dalish clan below as they trekked through the narrow paths, and couldn’t help but wonder if they had remained there this entire time.

“I’m surprised the city would allow them to make a settlement so close by.” The warden beside her spoke up as he noticed too. He had joined their squad at the behest of his commander, and had brought the missive regarding the mission they were about to embark on. His accent was difficult to place. A bit Ferelden, but like he hadn’t grown up there to develop it properly.

“I met them once.” She gestured to the elves below as they went about their usual duties.

“Their First is a friend of my sister, she moved into the Alienage years ago.”

“That so?” He blinked at her in surprise. “You think they’re here for her then?”

“I dont know.” She shrugged.

“One of the women I took my Joining with was a First.” the man continued. “Velanna was her name, could kill half of Starkhaven with a glare if she wanted.” He watched her for a moment with a critical eye before he extended his hand in greeting. “How rude of me, name’s Nathaniel. Nathaniel Howe.”

“Bethany.” She shook his hand hesitantly. “Bethany... Amell.”

She wasn't sure what it was that made her lie to the man, maybe a desire to separate herself further from her old life? Hoping Nathaniel didn't catch on to her deception, she continued. "Where is Velanna now?"

"She's with my Commander on a mission of their own." His critical gaze softened. "Part of the reason I was sent here, though I can't go into specifics."

Stroud signaled up ahead that they had reached the Deep Roads entrance, the very same Bartrand had led them to so many years ago. The darkness roared in her ears.

"Warden Bethany." The older warden called. "I'm sure you recognize where we are?"

"I do." She replied, swallowing the lump that began to form in her throat.

"Good." Stroud nodded in approval. "Since you are the most familiar with these paths, we are going to need you to take point." The Veteran warden gestured for Nathaniel to step forward. "You and Ser Howe will take two men with you to scout ahead. You are to mark your path so that we can follow with the rest of the necessary supplies."

"Where is it I am supposed to lead us to exactly?" She asked, dreading the answer.

"I can answer that." Nathaniel replied, pulling a small scroll from his pocket and reading it quickly. "From our understanding, you were in the company of Bartrand Tethras, a member of the dwarven Merchants Guild that led an expedition through this area of the Deep Roads, correct?" He eyed her carefully.

"Yes." Bethany answered hesitantly.

"Well it's simple enough, we just need you to lead us back there." The rogue said coolly, rolling the scroll back up.

"It's not that simple." she shook her head angrily. "There were cave-ins, and darkspawn, and dragons-"

"And you are no longer helpless, girl." Stroud cut her off. His frown was deep but his eyes softened with sympathy. "You are a Warden, and you are needed. The Maker led you to us in those caverns, and now he asks you to do so again."

"Once we reach the Thaig Stroud, we can continue with the second phase of the mission." Nathaniel added.

"There's more?" Bethany asked, brow raised.

"Oh yes," Nathaniel smiled. "You didn't think Warden Commander Surana, the Hero of Ferelden, would send me all the way here just to kill a few measly darkspawn did you?"

"The hero of Ferelden actually sent you?" Bethany couldn't keep the excited curiosity from bubbling up as she walked alongside the warden archer.

"In a manner of speaking." his gravelly voice echoed as they entered the large cavernous entryway. "Commander Surana received word from Seneschal Verel that the First Warden was sending a replacement."

"Replacement?" The mage's brows raised in surprise. "But she saved Ferelden, Amaranthine... everyone!"

"I was not there when she slayed the Archdemon. But from what I've come to understand, she was not supposed to survive the encounter. And the things we discovered below Amaranthine..." He frowned and shook his head. "Weisshaupt has demanded answers and she has refused to respond. I suppose sending me here was her way of protecting me, and herself, from what comes after."

They felt the Darkspawn corruption even before they reached the ruined dwarven entryway. There were several genlock and hurlocks, but it was the mountainous Ogre that had Bethany stop in her tracks. Images of Carver flying across the ruined landscape as they fled Lotharing flashed in her mind as the large darkspawn bellowed in rage. Not again.

Bow already aimed, Nathaniel was able to pick off a pair of the smaller creatures before taking aim at the bigger target. The other wardens beside her charged toward the awaiting horde, silverite blades slicing through corrupted flesh. The cacophony of battle and screams snapped the mage back to attention, and Bethany let out a flurry of electric bolts. Several darkspawn fell, their bodies still sizzling. One of the warden soldiers wailed as a Shriek leaped from the shadows, sinking its fangs and blades into the warden as they both tumbled to the ground. Bethany launched a stonefist, the earthen projectile crashed into the fearsome shadow's side, knocking it off its prey. Before it could recover an arrow sprouted from its exposed throat.

Nathaniel knocked another arrow, taking aim at the hulking Ogre again. The beast reached for a massive boulder; its large, deformed hand lifted the enormous stone free with little effort as it eyed the pair of them.

Nathaniel's arrow pierced the darkspawn in its right eye just as it raised the stone above its head. The creature stumbled back, colliding with the cavern wall behind it. The stone fell from its grasp landing on its twisted horned head. The entire cavern shook as both the beast and earth crashed to the ground. The roof above shifted and rumbled, dust and falling debris began to rain down around them. Bethany's magic called out as instinct kicked in and she cast the strongest barrier she could muster above their heads. The remaining darkspawn shrieked in horror as the roof above began to collapse.

Bethany could feel the sweat dripping down the side of her face as she focused on holding the barrier. The falling stones above shattered on the glistening veil of magic above them. Finally it was quiet. There was no sign of the other warden as Bethany rushed to her fallen comrades aid, but the damage was done. The man's eyes were long glazed over as she rolled him over. Another one she could not save.

Nathaniel squeezed her shoulder apologetically. "We need to move. That cave-in may attract more of them."

"Do we know where Ser knight went? He could need healing!" She stood and searched the surrounding rubble frantically.

"He was on the other side when the ceiling fell, either he made it back through the tunnels, or he's lost. Either way he's beyond our reach. We need to keep moving. We have a job to do."

Cautiously, they made their way through the rubble and further into the dwarven thaig.

"This isn't good." Nathaniel huffed as they reached another dead end. "Be careful, there's a lot of loose stones here as well."

They had been traveling for days, and it seemed every path that would lead them deeper into ancient ruin had been blocked.

"We'll have to wait for Stroud and the others." Bethany sighed as she leaned on larger rocks.

"Maker, I hope they get here before the darkspawn do."

"You seemed to handle them just fine." Nathaniel smirked. "You're stronger than you think."

"Carver, my brother, used to say that too." she smiled sadly at the memory of her twin. "But I couldn't protect him from that ogre either."

The archer frowned. "I'm sorry."

"Mother blamed my sister for letting him run off to face it. But he was a soldier and just wanted to make our family proud. He wouldn't have listened if she tried anyway."

"Sounds like your family holds your sister in high regard."

"I used to think my sister could do anything, but now..." Her voice trailed off as the sound of footsteps echoed behind them.

"That's no darkspawn." Nathaniel warned, drawing his bow.

As footfalls grew louder, Bethany let the power in her staff surge. Magic flooded the area as she prepared her spell.

"Nathaniel!" A familiar voice yelled out. "Warden Nathaniel Howe?"

The pair lowered their weapons slightly as Hawke and several others emerged from the nearby tunnel.

"Bethany?!"

"You know them?" Nathaniel looked to her cautiously, his bow still ready.

"She's my sister." Bethany sighed as she let the magic in her staff fizzle out.

"Ser Howe, your sister Delilah asked me to find you. We cleared a path back to the surface... I didn't expect to find you here too, Beth." Marian gestured in her direction. Bethany noted the crest of the Champion now fastened to her breastplate. "You don't look well, are you alright?"

"Yes, well, having the darkspawn taint forever in my veins will do that." The pained look on her sister's face made her regret her tone. "I... I know you did the best you could." She added gratefully.

“Thank you for clearing the path Champion.” Nathaniel saved her from making more of a fool of herself. I will be sure to meet with my sister when our business here is concluded. Farewell.”

They had made it as far as the Wounded Coast when the blinding light from the chantry lit up the sky. Time seemed to stop as the fireball rose into the sky and the screams of terror and death carried on the wind.

“Andrastre’s pyre!” Stroud shouted. Some of the wardens could only watch in stunned silence while others fell to their knees, heads bowed in prayer. Bethany’s heart pounded in her ears. Marian’s there, she knew it. She couldn’t sit idly by.

“Stroud.” She turned to her superior, the mustached man merely nodded knowing her request before it even left her lips.

Bethany ran as hard as her legs could carry her. She wasn’t sure if her sister would even accept her aid, but she had to try.



Bethany Hawke.



Wicked Grace

By: Spoopybat

“It’s been ages since I last played, remind me which is better. Songs or worms?” Anders asked as he tossed a handful of spiced nuts into his mouth.

“They’re serpents, Blondie, and I saw you play last month.”

“I think songs should be worth more than those silly serpents. Songs are much prettier.” Merrill said in a lilting tone as she focused on organizing her hand. “Everyone likes a good song, the same can’t be said for dragons.” Her nose scrunched up a little at the memory of their screeching.

“Kitten,” A tan hand engulfed the elf’s before pushing it closer towards her chest. “, your cards need to stay hidden.” Isabela pressed a kiss along the curls of her vallaslin.

“Oh! Right.”

“Twenty silver says she’s out first.” Anders said.

“There’s no fun in betting on a sure thing.” Varric mindlessly shuffled his cards, only vaguely focusing on their illustrations.

“What about Sebastian?” At the sound of his name he looked up from his hand, seemingly unaware that his friend was trying to bet against him.

“Oh there’s no way he’ll win.” Isabela grinned at the idea.

“What did I-” Varric had begun to object but Anders cut him off.

“Fine!” Anders let out an exaggerated sigh. “No coin, something simple then?”

“Stripping?” Isabela suggested.

“No.” Both Fenris and Aveline dismissed the idea.

“You never let me have any fun.” She pouted. As she thought she propped her arm up on the dingy wooden table, resting her chin against it. “Fine. Alcohol, *good* alcohol.” In any other tavern that would have been a rather vague request but the Hanged Man was special in that way. Then again Anders wasn’t completely certain of what the pirate considered good.

“Honey wine?”

“From here? I’d rather drink dragon piss.”

“I’m pretty sure they don’t serve that.” Merrill chimed in.

“Brandy?” Anders guessed.

“Better.”

“Speaking of,” Hawke lifted a hand and gestured towards the barmaid. “, they just got a shipment of wine that I think you’ll like Fen.” She grinned. “It’s Antivan.”

“Alright, betting starts at five silver, minimum raise is one.” Isabela opened her mouth to speak but Varric kept on going. “We can talk about stripping once there’s enough booze in us to kill a bronto.”

“I thought we already agreed; no stripping.” Aveline let out a frustrated sigh.

“*You* did.” The pirate toyed with the string that held her blouse together. “I said no such thing.”

“Why are you always so eager to take your clothes off?”

“Because my tits are a work of art.” Without realizing it Merrill nodded in agreement. “Unlike someone’s.” She muttered before taking a sip of ale. Pink managed to creep it’s way across the guard captain’s face.

All she could offer in return was a halfhearted, “Trollope.”

“Now now, there’s no need for name calling.” Varric smirked. “The game hasn’t even begun yet.”

“It has now.” Hawke placed some coins into the center of the table before drawing her first card.

Placing her cards face down on the table Hawke leaned back into the wooden chair. The Hanged Man was loud, her friends bickering was louder, but it was so much nicer than her quiet mansion. It was in this cacophony of friends that she was allowed to just be Hawke. Norah came around with the vintage Antivan and two empty tankards. While they may not be as fancy as wine glasses they were unquestionably better suited for their patrons. "Thank you." Marian offered the tired barmaid a grin before pouring both her and Fenris a more than generous portion. "They aged this in an ironbark cask."

"Sounds delicious." Isabela said as she stole the mug out of Hawke's hand. Marian went to reach for it again but the pirate ducked out of the way with ease, downing the wine in one go. "You were right, Sweetness, shit's fantastic."

"Want mine." Fenris motioned towards her with the cup but Hawke shook her head.

"I got this." Marian unceremoniously took a drink from the mostly empty bottle. Fenris snorted a laugh.

"Classy."

"Always am." She flashed him a wicked grin before turning her attention back to the game.

Merrill's grip on her hand tightened a little when she drew her first card. The Hanged Man was loud and her eyes narrowed as she focused on her hand, debating on whether or not she could work with what she pulled. "Should I?" She wondered under her breath, eyes scanning her hand as she contemplated her next move. Merrill's hand was weak before she drew the Song of Temperance. No matter what she discarded it wouldn't do her any good.

"You alright Kitten?" She jumped a little at the sound, turning to look at Isabela. For a moment she wondered if she could bluff well enough to keep playing. After another second of thought she decided that was a terrible idea.

"I think. . . I think I may be losing." She turned the cards slightly so the pirate could see her hand.

"Word of advice, don't announce that you've got a shit hand." Isabela's full lips tightened in a straight line. "But yes, that does seem to be the

case." The elf frowned slightly and set her cards upon the table.

"I'm out." If she was being honest she'd much rather eat some of the jam cookies Aveline brought.

"I'll play extra hard for you."

"We'll get Ser Feathers yet." She kissed Isabela on the forehead before taking a seat on the table beside theirs.

"I'm in for another two sovereigns." Varric tossed the coins into the pot with a grin. "Anyone else feel like losing more?"

"I'll raise." Hawke countered. One by one the table went round adding money to the pot and picking their new cards.

When it came to Fenris he wordlessly tossed some coins on the pile before drawing his card. "Kaffas." He grumbled under his breath, throwing his hand into the discard pile.

"Guess Broody's out."

He muttered another curse in Tevene before skulking towards the other elf. With a huff he fell into a chair.

"You lost too?" She asked the obvious question, legs absentmindedly swinging to and fro under the table. Fenris scoffed in response and sank further into his seat. "Cookie?" Merrill offered up the now half-empty tin but he dismissively waved a hand at it. With a shrug she set it down.

"I didn't lose." He corrected her. "I quit while I was ahead."

"Of course." A silence fell between the two elves. Merrill drummed her fingers to the bard's tune, humming along with the melody. Something about the song was familiar enough to jog her memory. "Hawke, did you ever tell everyone what happened with the nugs?"

"I'm sorry, the what?" Anders snorted a laugh.

"Nugs." Hawke stated simply. "To be more precise, nug breeding. Apparently they're the newest trend in high society."

"Aye, sometimes women bring them to the Chantry, they want the Maker to bless their offspring." Sebastian casually noted as he rearranged his

hand.

“That’s why you wanted me to ditch work?” Aveline balked. “Nugs!”

“In my defense, when I received word of the job I had assumed ‘escaped stud’ meant horses or mabari!” She held her hands up to shield herself from the daggers that Aveline was sending her way. “I didn’t know it was nugs until we got to the manor.”

Both the blondes shared a look of disbelief, Varric was the one who spoke up first. “I- I have to know, is it for racing or. . .”

“No! That’s the weird part. I drag Merrill around for hours trying to find the damned things, only to find out they’re pets!” She gestured wildly, needing some sort of outlet for her frustration. “They wanted us to traipse around Lowtown looking for their stud nug.”

“I think nugs are cute.” Merrill chirped.

“Cute or not they aren’t worth the fifty sovereigns some of these loons will pay.”

“What!” Isabela gasped, slamming her hands against the table.

“Yeah, they have ‘fancy’ patterns so they’re deemed pets. It’s all noble bullshit if you ask me.”

“Maybe we should change your title from Champion of Kirkwall to,” Varric held his hands up as he announced her new name with a flourish. “Hawke, Professional Nug Wrangler.”

Marian’s mask of annoyance finally broke and she devolved into a fit of giggles alongside Isabela. Hawke’s laugh was infectious, it had a way of warming up the space and easing those around her. This time it managed to coax a laugh out of Fenris, his face easing into a relaxed smile at the sound. His reaction in turn made Merrill giggle like a child.

“What?” With a frown he turned his attention towards the other elf. “Why are you looking at me like that?” Dark eyebrows furrowed as she continued snickering.

“You’re in love.” The last thing she wanted was to ruin Hawke’s lovely evening with an argument so she was careful to keep her voice low.

“I am not.” Fenris took a swig of the Antivan wine in an attempt to hide his embarrassment. The table’s laughter began to die down enough for Hawke to breathe properly.

“Everytime she looks away, you stare at Hawke with those sad puppy eyes.” She waved her hand between the two of them. Out of sheer indignation he slammed the steel pint onto the tabletop.

“There are no puppy eyes.” The way his cheeks darkened told Merrill everything she needed to know.

“It’s all right, you know. Even you can be happy once in a while. It won’t kill you,” She paused for a moment when Marian laughed again, watching as Fenris struggled to keep his expression neutral. “, but your face might crack if you smile, so do be careful.” Having heard their little exchange Varric barked out a laugh that managed to cut through the din of the tavern, making everyone at the main table jump.

“What’s so funny?” Marian leaned across the table to look him in the eye.

“Oh nothing, just thinking about how bad Aveline’s losing.” He brushed off Hawke’s incredulous look and tossed a few more silver onto the pile. “I’ll raise.”

“I am not!” The guard captain bristled in response, squaring off her shoulders in an attempt to look more intimidating. “And just to prove it I’m doubling your bet.”

Isabela’s grin widened. “Oh! The dwarf is right.” She whispered conspiratorially to their leader, leaning a little closer than needed.

Hawke watched as one of Aveline’s eyebrows involuntarily twitched. “Look at that eyebrow go.” She mused. Gold eyes quickly flicked downwards while Marian was distracted, hoping to catch a glance at her cards. Isabela’s not so subtle spying was rewarded with a gentle shove.

Hawke gladly threw more coins into the pot, she had more than enough coin to spare. While she paid her friends handsomely for putting up with her it still felt wrong to take their hard earned money away. Marian pulled her lip in a tight line intentionally mixing a hint of dismay into the expression. Without a second thought she threw both of her angels in the discard pile. She’d already won enough for tonight.

The round unfolded in an unusually peaceful manner. Marian carefully

watched for each of their tells, but aside from Aveline's eyebrow everyone was stone faced. When it was her turn again she drew her card. "Makers balls." Hawke groaned, tossing the Angel of Death upon the wooden table. "Show your hands." Aveline, Varric and Isabela sighed in various levels of annoyance.

"I have three knights: roses, mercy and sacrifice!" With a triumphant grin Anders announced each card as he set it on the table. "Looks like I win."

"Alright, alright, Blondie. There's no need to be smug about it."

"Not so fast," Sebastian interjected politely. "I think my hand might be better." He set his cards upon the table, showing the angels of fortitude, truth, and charity.

"But that's not-" Sebastian shifted his index finger, unveiling a hidden knight of dawn.

"Well I'll be damned!" Varric laughed, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "You really can play, Choir Boy."

"What was that about me being a sure thing?" Starkhaven's prince managed to sound so innocent while wearing a cocky grin.

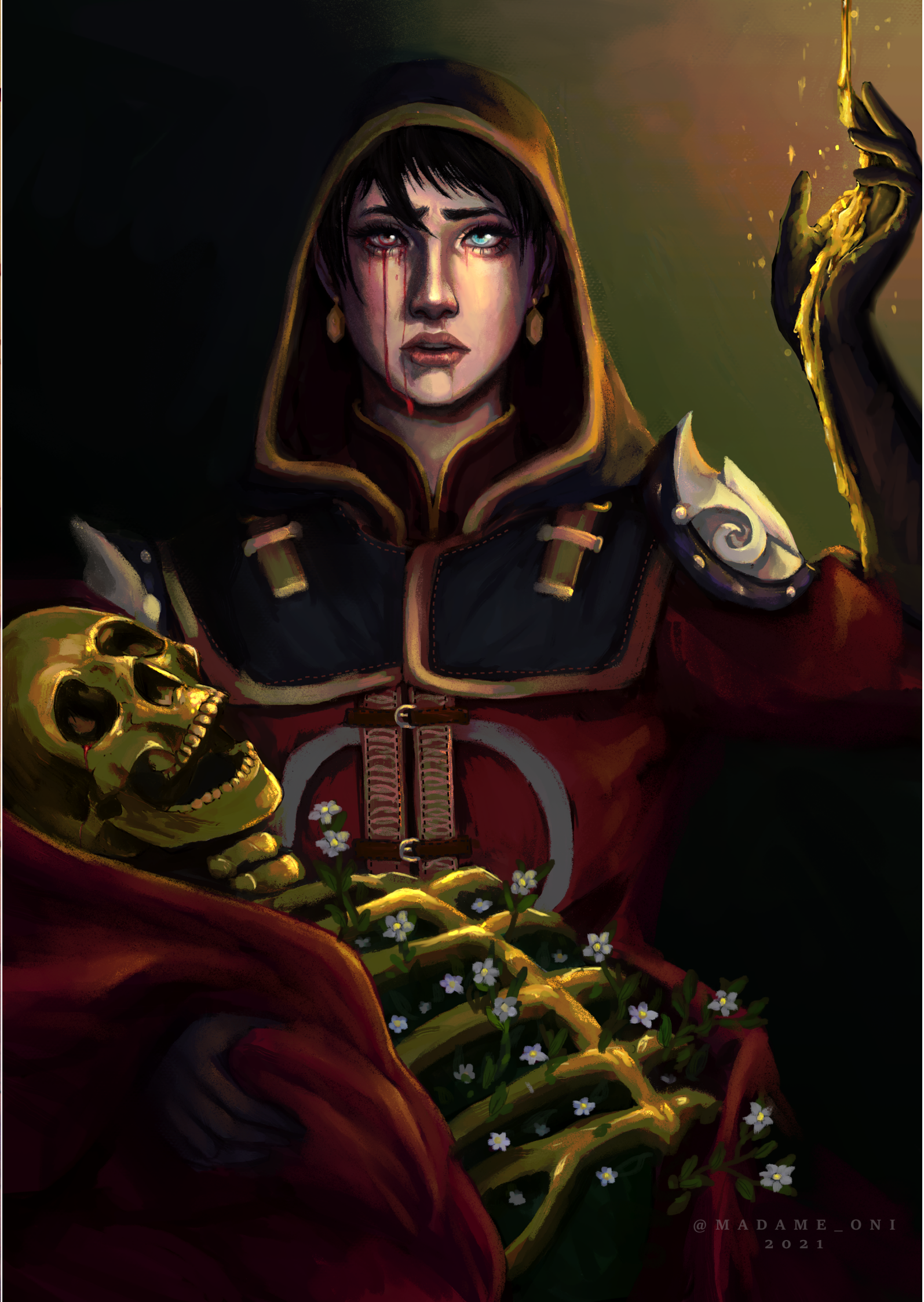
Anders sighed in defeat as he turned towards a gloating Isabela. "I guess I owe you that drink."

"I'll grab it." With a slender hand Marian plucked two sovereigns off her pile. "Heads up!" She turned on her heel and flicked two of the coins at the pair of elves, one for each of them. "There's four more for you if ya' join next round!"

Merrill cupped her hands to catch the coin while Fenris managed to pluck it from the air.

"The game's less fun with you just sitting there." Marian's drunken blush had darkened ever so slightly as she met their eyes. Without hesitation the two got up from their seats and rejoined the group. For a moment Hawke looked upon the full table and couldn't help but grin at the sight.





Shift

By: Tay

In Darktown, Anders had long learned to read the sounds from the other side of the clinic doors. The scuffled sounds of the poor, shifty and uncertain. The booms and clatters that came from high above, shaking the room and echoing in from all directions. The hard, stiff cuts of steel on steel, a steady tempo that let him know the templars were on patrol, and that he needed to hide away.

And the sounds he heard that afternoon. Soft shifts of fabric, like a rare breeze that rolled through the lower quarters, otherwise steady, slowly approaching.

Anders let out an amused breath, setting down his staff on the table in front of him. “Back again, Hawke?”

He heard a hitched breath behind him, then a sigh. “Am I really that bad at sneaking around?”

“Only around apostates, it seems.” Anders turned around, a light smile spreading on his lips as he caught the sight of Marian Hawke.

Marian chuckled, relaxing herself and walking towards him. “Suppose I’m getting a little sloppy, living up in Hightown. Busy day today?”

“Not exactly.” Anders looked back down to the table. “I’m taking the time preparing some potions while I have a moment.” Beside the staff were neatly arranged bottles, herbs, a basin of freshly-boiled water, and other potion ingredients. Only a small handful of red potions were arranged at the far end of the table, ready to use. He hadn’t gotten too far into it yet, but it was something simple he could do when things were quiet.

“Care for some help? I’m not one for potions, but I’m sure this sloppy rogue could still help out around here.”

Her footsteps grew closer, a whisper of warmth sliding up his arm as she came up beside him. Anders swallowed, letting out a light chuckle before

looking over at her.

“Of course, I would appreciate it.”

With a wry smile, Hawke took a step away, her arm brushing against his own. “Then I’ll clean up a little. With some luck maybe this’ll look more Lowtown than Darktown soon.”

Anders laughed nervously, giving her a smile as she walked away to help clean up the clinic. Part of him was relieved that she couldn’t help with potions. She’d be a good distance away. A *safe* distance away, for the both of them.

Visits from Marian down in the clinic were common these days. Ever since the ill-fated expedition into the Deep Roads, she’d always been a lively presence in Darktown. At first, she came in through her new estate’s cellar, only wanting to find some peace while her mother ordered the estate cleaned from top to bottom. Anders didn’t mind. She supported mages, and having *someone* in the clinic during the slow days was a welcome change from spending his days alone. And when he was tired from a long night sneaking through the gallows, it felt nice to know that at least the clinic wouldn’t descend to *complete* filth. Not that it wasn’t constantly on the verge of it, anyway.

Of course, there were other benefits to having an *appealing* woman in the clinic...though he tried not to dwell on those thoughts.

Anders busied his hands, moving to mix some more potions together and keep his eyes from wandering to the woman on the other side of the room. He could hear her rummage around, re-arranging items and cleaning any of the surfaces that were revealed underneath. While normally Anders wouldn’t think kindly of anyone else messing around with his things, Marian had proven herself trustworthy.

A weakness, as Justice always reminded him.

He let out a breath, wanting to fill the silence, lest his thoughts wander more. “So have you thought of any legitimate strategies for the next round of wicked grace?”

From the other side of the clinic, Marian laughed. “Cheating *is* a strategy, Anders. You just can’t get caught.”

“Really?” Anders chuckled. “Then why is there a new rule about it, then?”

“Must have been Isabela.”

“She was the one who made up the new rule, though.”

“I mean, I’m sure Isabela wanted to raise the stakes for herself.” Marian looked over at him. “What was it again? Every time you get caught cheating, you have to remove a piece of clothing.”

“*Two* pieces,” Anders clarified.

“Exactly, those are low stakes. If she gets caught, then she won’t even need to pay money.”

“Well, she - or rather, you - will just look like you’ve lost all your coin.” Anders smirked.

“You sound so sure about me cheating.”

“I’ve seen you slip a card from under your gloves.”

“It’s just a special strategy.” Marian hoisted a bucket of supplies off of one of the tables, setting it down to the ground with a stiff *thump*. “My father taught me years ago.”

“Somehow, I feel as though someone saw that ‘special strategy,’ you’d soon rival the way Isabela dresses.”

“Oh, I don’t need to worry about that.” Marian laughed. “Well, maybe not. If you’ve noticed my strategies, then maybe the cards are in your hand for that.”

Anders stopped, his thoughts beginning to wander. To the Hanged Man, to Marian sitting across from him, a card subtly pulled from her glove. Him, pointing something out to the rest of their friends. Marian, standing up...

He nearly dropped the bottle in his hands. He cleared his throat, biting his tongue to stop whatever train of thought he was about to go down.

“How’s the estate, by the way?” Anders quickly changed the subject, keeping his thoughts clean. “Your mother still cleaning up the place?”

Marian chuckled. “She’s focused on decorating now. Can’t have a spotless manor without some more banners on the walls.”

“It never ends, does it?”

“It never does.” Marian let out a laugh. “I honestly prefer cleaning down here than picking out which color of tapestries to use.”

“Things must be dire if you really prefer Darktown to that,” Anders looked over at her, smiling.

“Darktown isn’t all sunshine, but I definitely prefer the company down here better.”

Anders’ smile dropped, and he shifted a little in his stance. “You keep company down here?”

“Only with one man.” Marian looked at him, a little smirk on her face. “A good one, at that.”

He stood still for a while, a vial of darkening liquid held tight in his hands. “You should introduce me someday. Kirkwall has a lack of good men.”

“Maybe you already know him.”

He heard her footsteps wandering to another part of the clinic. He couldn’t help but let his eyes wander, admiring her as she continued her work around the room.

A bad idea, another part of him screamed. *A distraction*. Something he should send away before things get worse.

There were more important things to think about in Kirkwall. Healing the sick, helping the mages escape, that’s where his priorities needed to lie. A single woman didn’t hold a candle to a single injustice in the city, let alone the swamp its foundations were encased in.

And yet for the moment, his eyes were tied to the woman in his clinic, his hands frozen in place on the potion, slowly settling into a deep red.

Weak, the other side of him said. And he couldn’t help but agree with it.

Anders took in a deep breath, looking down to the potion. He waited a moment. Another. Listening to the sounds of walking and cleaning on the far side of the clinic.

And soon, he began to hear the sounds of metal on metal. Steel on steel.

All a steady tempo. A march, growing louder by the minute.

Templars.

His eyes snapped up, darting up to the clinic doors, to Marian - still cleaning.

“*Marian.*” A hushed whisper, followed by a single finger to his lips.

“Hm? What is it An-” Marian’s eyes met his, and she stopped herself. She tensed up, eyebrows furrowing, eyes darting towards the clinic doors.

Anders listened for a moment more. The footsteps were growing even louder. Too loud for his liking, but not close enough yet. With quick footsteps he crossed the room to the doors, taking in a breath before he opened the door. Behind, the clash of steel on steel pounded through the air and between each step was a deafening silence that was rare in Darktown. There was nobody outside his clinic, and nobody he could hear nearby. Even the rats and stray cats had fled.

Without hesitation he reached up to take down the lit lantern, pulling it inside and dousing the flames with magic. Anders firmly shut the door and locked it... but he knew even that wouldn’t be enough. Locks weren’t enough to keep the Templars out, especially if they were sniffing around for someone.

Anders looked up at Marian, expression like stone. “They’re close. We need to hide.”

“Should we go to Hightown? The cellar’s close.”

“Too risky.” Anders gestured for her to follow as he walked to the far end of the clinic, towards a single wooden door, partially obscured by several shelves. “They’re close enough that they might see the door close.” He reached over and opened the door.

Inside was a small closet repurposed into a hideaway. Thin bedding lined the floor - prepared for long stays in the shadows - as well as several shelves of potions and food carved directly into the thick walls of Darktown. It was cramped, claustrophobic, but it was safe. If only he didn’t hate it.

Anders motioned for Marian to enter and as she did, he was close behind. In seconds, the door was shut and the interior lock firmly latched.

From there, it was a waiting game.

The hideaway was cramped, even more so with a second occupant inside. Anders found himself pressed against the door, listening carefully to the sounds outside, listening for when it was safe. Marian was in front of him, leaning against him as she also listened. He wrapped an arm around her to help her keep steady.

Seconds passed. Minutes. Hours. It was impossible to really know the time in the darkness. All Anders could listen to was the sounds of metal scratching through the air in that rhythmic beat, tearing through his eardrums and splitting through his thoughts.

What if they were looking for him?

It was inevitable. Any mage was on limited time, even in freedom. He knew that. Everyone knew that. But every inch of him rebelled against that thought.

Footsteps grew louder, filling the clinic. Voices were joining them now. Casual lulls of muted conversation.

Half of him wanted to shrink back into the darkness, slither off to the most cramped, desolate place he could find. Somewhere like the deep roads. Being a warden allowed him this escape once. Would that be better, in the end?

The other half - the louder, more dominant part - wanted to break the door down.

Templars invading his sanctum. After they took his childhood from him, his life, *Karl’s* life, the life of every mage in Thedas. After the abuses, the injustices...they would desecrate this, too?

Anders’ arm around Marian tightened... and trembled.

He could feel part of him slipping. A crackle of blue sparking through his vision. From outside the hideaway, he heard a knock at the door. A single question. *Is anyone there?*

Yes, another part of him screamed.

Another spark of blue crossed his eyes and Anders bit his tongue. No. Not now. Not here, not with *her*. They just needed to wait. To fight would ruin

everything. All the mages he still had yet to help free the circle, all the people he had yet to heal in Darktown. If templars died on patrol, more would come. No matter how he would try to hide it, it wouldn't end.

Let them come. Anders' grip tightened once more. *Let them come, and let me tear them apart. Let me make them pay.*

He bit his tongue harder. The taste of copper filled his mouth.

With the pain, there was silence. No footsteps. No other voices. Just two breaths in the hideaway, and two voices inside of Anders' mind.

Finally, there was another muffled voice, and the shifting of metal. Dutiful footsteps of metal on metal, slowly growing more distant. Quieter.

Anders and Marian remained tense inside the hideaway, unmoving until several seconds of silence finally lingered around them. And finally, the other voice in his head grew quieter and let him rest.

Anders let out a relieved breath. "That was close."

"It was." Marian chuckled - her voice very close, *too* close.

Anders blinked, looking down to see his arm around Marian, keeping her close to his chest... and fully realized the position they were in. She was practically leaning up against him, and he was squeezed right between the door and a beautiful woman.

"Oh! I-" Anders removed his arm, his other scrambling for the lock, fingers trembling around it. "I'm sorry, I..." Fingers fumbled around the latch. Another turn, just one more.

In front of him, Marian only laughed, her breath curling up against his skin.

Finally, the lock fell away and Anders quickly opened the door and took a step back, giving Marian *much needed* and *necessary* space.

"There we are..." Anders swallowed and looked away. "I can't say how sorry I am."

"No need for apologies," Marian replied as she walked out of the hideaway, looking pointedly at Anders. "It wasn't unwelcome. I daresay I might have even liked that."

Liked it?

Anders looked back at her, warmth sparking up his chest. To hear such a beautiful woman say that, a woman who helped and worked at his side, who understood everything that was wrong in the world...

Part of him wanted to close that distance. To hold her for longer in his arms. To pull her close and kiss her as much as he wanted to, to finally fall to the desire he felt ever since she fell into his life.

The other part of him was bright blue, sparking beneath his eyelids.

He bit his tongue, holding everything back. Everything that he wanted... it was forfeit now. He couldn't act on it, not as the man he was.

Maybe if they met sooner. Sometime in Amaranthine. But now...

Marian crossed her arms, and let out a light chuckle. "Struck speechless by me? Not the worst thing, you know." She relaxed, and walked over to the front doors of the clinic.

"Right..." Anders cleared his throat, trying to get a better hold of himself.

"I should head back to Hightown." Marian looked back at Anders. "I trust you'll be in the Hanged Man tonight? I can bother some Templars before then."

"So long as you're careful, that's all I ask."

"No need to worry about me." Marian opened the door and smirked. "Well, maybe you could worry more during Wicked Grace, depending where the cards fall."

"You mean where they fall from your sleeve?"

Marian only laughed and left with a slight wave in his direction. Anders half-heartedly waved back, watching as the door swayed shut behind her.

He let out a breath and practically crashed down on a chair in the corner of the clinic. Slowly, his eyes closed, his ears filling with the sounds of slowly retreating shifts of silk and a breeze rolling to Hightown.



Vir Bor'assan

By: Kate B.

Sunlight danced through the leaves of the Vhenadah! Merrill clutched its trunk, two stories off the ground, as heads with dusty hats and soot-stained scarves bobbed around the Alienage square below. The shoes Varric had bought her, soft leather sandals with a daisy etched into the sole, hung from a cord strung around her neck, swinging gently side to side as she climbed. This was the only place in Kirkwall where she could feel something other than the rough, dead stone of the city under her feet. Her toes gripped into the bark and she jumped onto another limb.

Merrill had been in Kirkwall for weeks now. She had intended to keep count of the days -- it was a Keeper's job to remember, after all -- but there was a dullness to the winter here that paralyzed. No, it did more than that. It strangled at the root. Grey mornings bled into grey afternoons bled into grey nights, pierced only by her walks to and from Lowtown's markets to gather and return laundry. That was another gift from Varric: a way to keep herself from starving.

But today felt different. It was the first yawning of spring, one of those days where it still felt miraculous that a breeze could be something warm. The Vhenadah!'s leaves had stayed green throughout the winter -- as they always did, according to her new neighbors. But they began to flicker now with a sort of cerulean radiance that seemed to mirror the sky above them. The strokes of clouds, the arcs of birds, all reflected in the leaves themselves. It was the tree's own sort of budding, of returning to the world. Merrill had never seen anything like it.

Today was the day. It had to be. Today she would make herself a new staff. She pressed herself close to the tree and hooked her arm onto a higher branch. Carefully, she pulled the rest of her body upwards.

It was shameful how quickly she had lost her old one. The one she had carried for years, the one given to her the day she became the Keeper's second. That first night in Kirkwall, after a city guard had marched her down to the Alienage, she was greeted by an elven man patrolling the border. He took one look at the staff and seized it, cracking it against his knee. It was just a walking stick, Merrill cried, as it splintered at her feet. It was the same lie she had told the city guard, but the elf was not as stupid. He stared at her. His eyes were kind, of all things. He told her that she would be welcomed as long as she brought no harm to the elves that lived there. Above all, he said quietly, the Alienage needed to survive.

survival.

So she went the rest of the winter tearing through Marethari's notes to learn how to make a new staff. Staves weren't like bows, the most precious of Dalish weaponry. The way Master Ilen had talked about his process made it clear that the crafter of the bow was just as important as the archer wielding it. A bad bow in a skilled archer's hands could shoot a bird, as her clan used to say, but it couldn't sing like one. Staves weren't like that. Some were better than others of course, and mages had their preferences. But mages could do just as much damage, and create just as much song, without a staff at all. Marethari would say that the hardest part of making a staff was carving a comfortable hand grip.

It's not as if Merrill had ever understood how one would go about creating a chunk of wood that could sing. She wasn't even good at the hand grip part. She had not been graced by June's love of crafting, a fact that had been pointed out to her in every woodworking or glassblowing or pottery lesson taught to her throughout the years. It was embarrassing for a Keeper's second, but that seemed to bother Marethari more than it ever did Merrill. No, the real embarrassment came now, as she spent hours upon hours staring at the curling mass of wood and glass that was the eluvian -- a far more dangerous item than her staff, but no one batted an eye as she hauled it into her house that very same evening. She was the last person in the clan that should be trying to fix the blasted thing, and yet the only one willing to do so.

Merrill wiped sweat from her face. It was no use to think about her clan now. The tree had enveloped her in a glittering sea of green and blue, and she took a knife to cut a branch, tender and young. It yielded easily into her palm. She tucked it into her satchel and reached up to grab a new branch, but her fingers found something soft and leathery instead.

"Oi!" A woman yelped. "Who's that?"

Merrill nearly fell out of the tree. "Isabela?"

"Kitten?"

Leaves rustled above, and two faces peered down at Merrill. Isabela, hair caught in the wind, and Hawke, legs kicked up on a crooked branch, a bottle of whiskey in hand.

"Oh!" Merrill said. "Hello! How are you? No, sorry, that was rude of me. I don't mean to interrupt-- "

“Nonsense,” Hawke said. She was smiling wide. “Up you get.”

Hawke reached out a hand and pulled Merrill onto their branch.

“What are you two doing?” Merrill asked, breathless.

“This is the best view of the docks outside of Hightown,” Isabela said. “And well, Kitten, don’t know if I’ve said it enough. But I hate Hightown.”

Hawke laughed. “I’m sure you have a better reason for being up here than me and Bela?”

“I’m-- well,” Merrill said, brushing twigs out of her hair. “Trying to make my new staff.”

Isabela’s eyes widened. “Kitten! It’s your big day!”

“No, it’s--”

“Come off it, you’ve been talking about this all winter,” Hawke said.

“Here, I have something for you.” Isabela dug a hand into her boot and pulled out a small, black pearl.

“Oh, Isabela,” Merrill began. The pearl was dark and deep and beautiful, as if plucked from the soul of the sea itself. “I can’t--”

“No, no, take it. I talked to that lady at the Hanged Man -- the one with the green teeth, you know? She said it’s got sea magic. Like, proper sea magic.”

“Oh! And here, take this.” Hawke fished into a pocket of her robes and pulled out a lock of fiery red hair. “This has got to have some sort of magical properties too, right?”

“Hawke,” Merrill said sternly. “When did you--”

“Hey, not my idea.”

“Aveline was several drinks in one night and--” Isaebela frowned. “Don’t look at me like that, Kitten. It’s important to take these opportunities when they come.”

“Tell you what,” Hawke said. “I’ve got just the thing for your staff. I’ll drop it by later. But now, you’ll sit with us, and we’ll forget all about which one of our dear friend’s heads this may or may not have come from, and we’ll

drink to your soon to come magical freedom.”

Merrill looked between the two of them. They seemed to be part of the tree, curled up in it. Beautiful, flowering things.

So that’s what Merrill did. She sat, and she drank, and she watched the sun set over a city that looked just a bit more alive than it ever had before.

Later that night, a thin parcel wrapped in cloth slipped through the bottom of Merrill’s door. When she picked it up, a large, silver blade tumbled out along with a note written in Hawke’s unmistakably messy script:

I can’t believe you’ve already been in Kirkwall for 10 weeks. I know what it feels like to be new here -- don’t know if I can say it gets better, but you do get better stuff. Still, don’t ever forget where we came from. And more importantly, do not ever EVER forget: when your mana fades, just start swinging.

Merrill laughed. She picked the blade off the floor and turned it between her hands. Sure enough, there was a Ferelden mabari etched into the dark metal. The sight of it brought her a comfort she hadn’t known she’d missed.

The blade was brilliantly sharp. It sliced right through the leather of her sandals -- she’d get new ones, somehow. Right now, she needed something that would bind together the gifts and the branches she’d gathered. Isabela’s pearl and Aveline’s hair, woven between the twisting wood. Hawke’s blade fixed tightly at the bottom. And Varric’s leather connecting it all. She recited the lines from Marethari’s journal, making sure to pronounce the words just right, as though her Keeper was still looking over her shoulder with a smile. She traced the newborn staff in oil and soot. Then she placed it at the edge of her bed, ready to be bound to the Fade when she went to sleep.

Merrill crossed the room and eyed the staff. Frowning, she prayed to whichever gods would listen that it wouldn’t fall apart. She looked out her window. The limbs of the Vhenadhal were twisting, dancing with the breeze, and their leaves twinkled like the stars above them. For the first time in weeks, something warm rose within her. She danced alongside the tree, her reflection cracking and splitting into thousands of pieces in the Eluvian behind her.





